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Eighth semi-annual report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolution 1559 (2004)

I. Background

1. The present report is my eighth semi-annual report on the implementation of Security Council resolution 1559 (2004). It provides an update on progress in the implementation of the resolution, and highlights areas of concern that continue to impede efforts to strengthen Lebanon's sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence.

2. Over the past six months, Lebanon has experienced both the ruinous effects of sectarian violence and hope and optimism.

3. On 6 May 2008 the Lebanese Cabinet declared Hizbullah's secure communication network separate from the State's system "illegal and unconstitutional" and announced the dismissal of the chief of security of the Beirut International Airport. In protest, Hizbullah closed all roads leading to and from Beirut airport and other principal roads in parts of the capital. Hizbullah stated that its actions would continue until the Government rescinded both decisions. Later that day, there were exchanges of fire between members of the opposition and pro-Government forces throughout several districts of Beirut. Pro-Government groups closed the main border crossing between Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic. The violence, which on occasion included the use of heavy weaponry, escalated and spread to other parts of the country. This brought the country to an effective standstill. Hostilities continued until 14 May and led to 69 fatalities and more than 180 wounded. During the clashes, many alleged human rights violations were registered, including illegal detention and ill-treatment, civilian deaths, instances of summary execution, destruction of private property, and attacks on the media and freedom of expression.

4. On 11 May, the League of Arab States convened an emergency meeting. It decided to dispatch a delegation to Beirut, and condemned the use of armed violence to achieve political objectives. On 14 May, a Ministerial Committee of Arab Foreign Ministers headed by the Prime Minister of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Jasseim Al-Thani, and by the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, Amre Moussa, travelled to Lebanon. The Committee held discussions with the parties aimed at ending the crisis. On 15 May, the Cabinet rescinded its decisions of 6 May. Shortly afterwards, the Arab Committee announced an inter-Lebanese understanding that called for calm on the streets and the withdrawal of all armed elements. The

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agreement also called for a Lebanese National Dialogue to begin the following day in Doha, aiming to seek consensus on the issues of a national unity government and certain aspects of a new electoral law, thereby making possible the election of a President of the Republic.

5. Lebanese political leaders travelled to Doha on 16 May. Through intense efforts led by the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, his Prime Minister and the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, Lebanese leaders reached a comprehensive political understanding on 21 May, leading to the election of General Michel Sleiman as President of Lebanon on 25 May. On the eve of the election, the long-standing protests outside the Prime Minister's office were brought to an end.

6. On 11 July President Sleiman issued a decree forming the seventieth Lebanese Cabinet. On 12 August, the new Cabinet and its policy statement received an overwhelming vote of confidence from Parliament.

7. At the invitation of President Bashar Al-Assad, on 13 and 14 August President Sleiman visited the Syrian Arab Republic, where a series of agreements were reached of significant relevance to the implementation of resolution 1559 (2004). On 15 October, the Foreign Ministers of Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic signed in Damascus a memorandum establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries.

8. Despite the reconciliation agreement reached in Doha, over the reporting period there have been violent clashes leading to fatalities, in particular in and around the northern city of Tripoli. In particular, on 13 August, an improvised explosive device was detonated at a bus stop frequently used by Lebanese Army soldiers in Tripoli, killing 15 people, including 10 soldiers.

9. On 10 September, Saleh Aridi, a senior member of the Lebanese Democratic party, was killed in a car bomb in Baysur. This was the first political assassination in the country since the reconciliation accord reached in Doha.

10. On 16 September President Sleiman convened at Baabda Palace the first session of the National Dialogue pursuant to the Doha agreement to discuss the reinforcement of the State's authority throughout the country, and a national defence strategy. The Secretary-General of the League of Arab States attended the meeting. In parallel, a series of reconciliation efforts were undertaken by Lebanese political parties.

11. On 29 September, a new terrorist attack targeted the Lebanese Armed Forces in the city of Tripoli, killing six people, including four soldiers; 32 people were injured, 18 of them soldiers.

II. Implementation of resolution 1559 (2004)

12. Since the adoption of Security Council resolution 1559 (2004) in September 2004, several of its provisions have now been implemented. In my second semi-annual report, of 26 October 2005 (S/2005/673), I was able to certify that free and credible parliamentary elections had been held early in 2005. The same conclusion applied to the withdrawal of Syrian troops, military assets and the military intelligence apparatus from Lebanon. During the current reporting period, a

President of the Republic was finally elected, consistent with the provisions of the resolution, thus reviving the constitutional institutions of the country. In addition, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic have engaged in high-level talks on matters of relevance to Lebanon's sovereignty, political independence and territorial integrity, such as the establishment of diplomatic relations and the delineation of an international boundary between the two countries, as strongly encouraged by the Security Council in its resolution 1680 (2006). I am therefore glad to report on major strides towards the full implementation of the requirements of resolution 1559 (2004).

13. Meanwhile, the clashes that occurred in May 2008 and the several security incidents throughout the reporting period, in particular in northern Lebanon, continue to emphasize the threats posed by the presence of militias to the stability of the country, and the need for the Government of Lebanon and the Lebanese Armed Forces to exercise the monopoly on the use of force throughout Lebanon. Resolution 1559 (2004) thus remains to be implemented in full.

14. Over the past six months, my representatives and I have remained in regular and close contacts with all parties in Lebanon, as well as with relevant regional and international players.

A. Sovereignty, territorial integrity, unity and political independence of Lebanon

15. The main objective of resolution 1559 (2004) is to strengthen the sovereignty, territorial integrity, unity and political independence of Lebanon under the sole and exclusive authority of the Government of Lebanon throughout Lebanon, consistent with the Taif Agreement of 1989 to which all the political parties in Lebanon committed themselves. I continued to assign to this matter the highest priority in my efforts to assist with the implementation of the resolution. I welcome President Sleiman's appeal, in his inaugural speech, for unity and national dialogue, and his vow to protect the country's Constitution, sovereignty and independence. I also welcome his commitment to the Charter of the United Nations and United Nations resolutions.

16. I have maintained my efforts to encourage the early initiation of a process between Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic, based on an agreed action agenda, which would eventually lead to the establishment of full diplomatic relations, in fulfilment of the relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions 1680 (2006) and 1701 (2006) emanating from resolution 1559 (2004).

17. On 12 July, the President of France, Nicolas Sarkozy, convened a summit in Paris with the Presidents of Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic and the Emir of Qatar. At its conclusion, the President of France announced that the Presidents of Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic had informed him of their willingness to exchange ambassadors. On 14 August, the two Presidents concluded two days of talks in Damascus with the release of a joint statement read out at a press conference held by the Foreign Ministers of the two countries, Fawzi Salloukh and Walid Al-Moualem. In line with the commitment obtained in Paris, the communiqué announced the agreement of the two States to establish diplomatic relations at the ambassadorial level. On 21 August, the Lebanese Cabinet endorsed the decision to establish diplomatic relations with the Syrian Arab Republic and to open an

embassy in Damascus. On 14 October, President Bashar Al-Assad signed a decree establishing diplomatic relations between the Syrian Arab Republic and Lebanon. The decree also stated that a Syrian embassy would be established in Beirut. On 15 October, the Foreign Ministers of the Syrian Arab Republic and Lebanon signed in Damascus a memorandum announcing the establishment of diplomatic relations effective the same day. In that document, the two parties reaffirmed their determination to reinforce and consolidate their relations on the basis of mutual respect for their sovereignty and independence. The Presidents of Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic informed me that indeed embassies would be established in both capitals by the end of 2008. I commend the leaders of Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic for these new significant steps towards the full implementation of resolutions 1559 (2004) and 1680 (2006), and look forward to the opening of embassies in the two capitals.

18. I have also maintained my efforts to encourage the Syrian Arab Republic and Lebanon to achieve the full delineation of their common border, which remains an element of crucial importance to a number of explicit operational requirements of resolutions 1559 (2004), 1680 (2006) and 1701 (2006). During the reporting period, there has not yet been significant progress on this matter.

19. In this context, I noted that, at the conclusion of the Lebanese-Syrian summit held in Damascus on 13 and 14 August, the two parties announced the revival of the work of the joint committee for delineating the common borders on the basis of priorities that would be set by both sides. I welcome the renewed intention of the two countries to make progress on this matter and expect its early materialization, in particular in those areas where the border is uncertain or disputed.

20. On 30 August the Council of Ministers of Lebanon denounced the trespassing into Lebanese territory in Deir al-Ashayer, in the eastern Beka'a Valley, of Syrian citizens, reportedly to dig two wells on Lebanese territory. I recall that I already reported in my letter to the Security Council of 23 May 2005 (S/2005/331) and in my second semi-annual report on the implementation of resolution 1559 (2004) (S/2005/673), that the status of the Deir al-Ashayer area remained unclear and needed to be addressed in a formal border agreement to guarantee the territorial integrity of Lebanon. This incident exemplifies the importance of the timely implementation of tangible measures towards the delineation of the border between the Syrian Arab Republic and Lebanon.

21. I have continued my cartographic and diplomatic work in relation to the issue of the Shab'a Farms area, and will further report on this in my upcoming report on the implementation of resolution 1701 (2006).

22. Preventing breaches of the arms embargo is a critical element for strengthening Lebanon's sovereignty, territorial integrity, unity and political independence. I remain concerned by the general porosity of the Syrian-Lebanese border, which renders it easily penetrable. Further, the permanent presence of paramilitary infrastructures belonging to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command and Fatah al-Intifada, which straddle the border, gives such groups de facto control of parts of the border. A number of Member States have also expressed to me their growing concern that weapons and fighters continue to flow across the Syrian-Lebanese border. I recall the conclusion of the recent report of the Lebanon Independent Border Assessment Team (S/2008/582) that, in general, Lebanon has not yet succeeded in enhancing the overall security of its borders in

any significant manner. It is important that all States, in particular neighbouring States, abide by the arms embargo called for in resolution 1701 (2006).

23. The Syrian Arab Republic has continued to deny any involvement in breaches of the arms embargo. At the conclusion of the Syrian-Lebanese summit held in Damascus on 13 and 14 August, the two parties agreed to work together to control the border and halt smuggling operations through action by the relevant authorities, and by coordinating activities on both sides of the border. The President of Lebanon has confirmed to me that special committees will be established to address this matter. I welcome this commitment.

24. Over the past few weeks, the Syrian army has intensified its deployment along the northern Syrian-Lebanese border. The President of Lebanon indicated publicly that his Syrian counterpart had informed him that the deployment of troops along Lebanon's northern border was meant to contain smuggling activities, and fell within the framework of the outcome of the Lebanese-Syrian summit held in Damascus in August, and was in conformity with the requirements of resolution 1701 (2006). However, some Lebanese leaders have expressed their concern over the deployment.

25. Over the reporting period, Israeli aircraft have continued to violate Lebanese airspace. The Government of Israel has continued to claim that the flights are carried out for security reasons, pending an improved security regime along the Lebanese-Syrian border, and full enforcement of the arms embargo pursuant to resolution 1701 (2006). I have regularly called on Israel to cease these overflights, which stand in violation of Lebanese sovereignty and Security Council resolutions.

26. Israel continues to occupy the northern part of Ghajar, which constitutes a violation of Lebanon's sovereignty and resolution 1701 (2006). The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon is actively working with the Lebanese Armed Forces and the Israel Defense Forces to find an early solution to this matter. I will report on this issue in more detail to the Council in my next report on the implementation of resolution 1701 (2006).

27. I am disturbed by the repeated exchanges of threats, through the media, between Israel and Hizbullah. I urge all parties to cease this public discourse, which creates anxiety among civilian populations on both sides.

B. Extension of the control of the Government of Lebanon over all Lebanese territory

28. The President and the Prime Minister of Lebanon have reiterated their vital interest in extending the Government's authority over all Lebanese territory, so that it is the sole armed force in the country, with the exception of United Nations peacekeeping forces. They have also committed themselves to improving the monitoring of the land borders to prevent unauthorized flows of weapons, munitions and personnel into the country. The Lebanese Armed Forces are taking steps within their capabilities to ensure peace and stability in the country, despite being overstretched as a result of numerous competing security challenges, in particular the clashes in May and the later violent events in and around Tripoli. The Lebanese Armed Forces undertook at the beginning of September a temporary redeployment

of troops from southern Lebanon in order to address these security concerns. I will elaborate on this issue in my forthcoming report on resolution 1701 (2006).

29. The continued existence and activities of militias as well as the allegations of widespread rearming and paramilitary training by groups on all sides of Lebanon's political spectrum constitute a challenge for the exclusive military authority of the Government of Lebanon.

30. I am gravely concerned by the emergence and apparent strengthening of extremist elements and foreign fighters based largely in and around Tripoli. This phenomenon is but another challenge to the consolidation of the Government's authority.

31. The Lebanese Armed Forces play a crucial role in strengthening Lebanon's sovereignty and control over all the country, thereby promoting stability in Lebanon and beyond. I call on donor countries to come forward and assist the Lebanese Armed Forces in meeting their obligations under relevant Security Council resolutions.

C. Disbanding and disarmament of Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias

32. The continued existence of Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias undermines the consolidation of the Lebanese State and the stability of the country and the region. It is also incompatible with the objective of strengthening Lebanon's sovereignty, territorial integrity, unity and political independence. The most significant Lebanese militia is the armed component of Hizbullah. In addition, several Palestinian militias operate in the country, inside and outside of refugee camps.

33. Over the reporting period, there has been no tangible progress towards the disbanding and disarming of militias as called for in the Taif Agreement and resolution 1559 (2004).

Lebanese militias

34. The violence that engulfed Lebanon in May demonstrated yet again the serious threat that armed groups outside the control of the State pose to the stability of Lebanon. Hizbullah and other armed groups engaged in heavy clashes in many regions throughout the country, resulting in loss of life, injuries, damage to property and general instability. Rocket-propelled grenades, mortars and machine guns were used in the fighting.

35. Since the signature of the Doha agreement, there have been a series of clashes, particularly in and around Tripoli, that have been both sectarian and political in nature. Those incidents included the use of heavy gunfire, hand grenades and acts of vandalism in populated areas. They claimed more than 25 lives.

36. Over the reporting period, Lebanon has also witnessed a growing pattern of attacks against its armed forces. For instance, on 31 May, the Army thwarted an attack from a man who was reportedly wearing an explosive belt (2 kg of TNT) and tried to blow himself up next to an army checkpoint outside Ain al-Hilweh camp. On 11 June an exchange of fire occurred between the armed forces and armed

people at a checkpoint outside Ain al-Hilweh camp. One soldier was injured. On 30 July, unidentified individuals fired assault weapons at an army checkpoint in Hermel, killing one soldier. On 13 August, a bomb went off in Tripoli, killing 15 people, including 10 soldiers. On 29 September, four soldiers were killed by an explosion in Tripoli. I strongly condemn these terrorist attacks against the symbols of Lebanon's sovereignty. Such acts are also deeply worrying threats to the long-term stability of the country.

37. On 28 August, Army First Lieutenant Samer Hanna was killed when his helicopter was fired upon over the Sojoud Hills in southern Lebanon. Hizbullah admitted responsibility and surrendered one of its members to the judicial authorities. The military prosecutor has opened an investigation into the incident.

38. All these events are stark reminders of the urgency and importance of ensuring that the Government has the monopoly on the use of force in Lebanon. I am deeply concerned by the possibility that the scars left by the clashes early in 2008 may in fact prompt, if not accelerate, a domestic arms race in Lebanon, with unforeseeable consequences. Paramilitary activity is also incompatible with the holding of free and fair parliamentary elections, scheduled for early in 2009. The understanding reached in the Taif Agreement in the aftermath of the civil war that all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias would disband and disarm led, at the time, Lebanese militias, with the exception of Hizbullah, to give up their armed capacities. That understanding must be preserved to avoid the spectre of a renewed confrontation among the Lebanese.

39. Hizbullah's maintenance of a major armed component and a paramilitary infrastructure separate from the State, including a secure network of communication, which the group itself deems an integral part of its arsenal, is a direct challenge to the authority of the Government of Lebanon and its security forces and prevents their exclusive control over the entire territory of Lebanon. Hizbullah's structures, parallel to and distinct from those of the State, also remain a threat to regional peace and security. I therefore reiterate my call on Hizbullah to comply with all relevant Security Council resolutions, and urge all parties that maintain close ties with Hizbullah and have the ability to influence it, in particular the Syrian Arab Republic and the Islamic Republic of Iran, to support its transformation into a political party proper, consistent with the requirements of the Taif Agreement and resolution 1559 (2004).

40. I am pleased to report to the Security Council that, at the conclusion of the National Dialogue, held in Doha from 16 to 21 May, in the aftermath of the bloody clashes in Lebanon, the Lebanese political leaders reaffirmed their commitment to the principles of the Lebanese Constitution and the Taif Agreement. The Lebanese leaders also committed themselves to prohibit the use of weapons or violence in any internal conflict that may arise to preserve the national partnership of coexistence. The leaders also pledged to pursue their National Dialogue under the auspices of the President of the Republic, and to promote the Government of Lebanon's authority throughout its territory and its relations with different groups in a way that would guarantee the security of the State and its citizens.

41. On 16 September, President Sleiman chaired the first session of the National Dialogue, gathering the 14 Lebanese leaders who took part in the signing of the Doha agreement: the Speaker of Parliament, Nabih Berri; the Prime Minister, Fouad Siniora; the leader of the Future Movement, Saad Hariri; the PSP leader, Walid

Jumblatt; the FPM leader, Michel Aoun; Member of Parliament Mohammad Raad (representing Hizbullah's Secretary-General); the Lebanese Forces leader, Samir Geagea; the former President and Kataeb Party leader, Amine Gemayel; the Ministers Elias Skaff and Mohammad Safadi; and Members of Parliament Hagop Pakradounian, Ghassan Tueni, Boutros Harb and Michel Murr. The session was also attended by the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States. In his opening statement, President Sleiman stressed the need to develop a national defence strategy under the authority of the State.

42. A final communiqué was agreed upon after a three-hour discussion, composed of six points. It was agreed:

(a) To launch talks on a defensive strategy as a priority in the light of the multiple views of the Dialogue participants, in order to reach a common vision for that strategy based on the decisions of the National Dialogue and the Doha agreement.

(b) To take prompt and serious action to resolve security tensions, and to reach agreement on a mechanism that would put an end to that condition in order to reinforce the efforts towards reconciliation in various areas, and spread it among all factions in Lebanon.

(c) To adopt a pact of honour committing the participants to the main points of the inaugural speech of the President, to refrain from any form of political provocation, to tone down the political and media discourse and to announce that commitment through the media.

(d) To confirm the decisions reached at the previous session of the Dialogue, and to work towards implementing them.

(e) That the President will conduct bilateral talks in order to consolidate reconciliation, and to encourage meetings to enhance the chances of the success of the Dialogue in preparation for the next session.

(f) To hold the next session of the Dialogue on 5 November 2008, at 11 a.m. at Baabda Palace.

43. In the context of the launching of the National Dialogue, several reconciliation efforts have been initiated among the Lebanese leaders. I welcome the agreement signed on 8 September by more than 20 key political and religious leaders of Tripoli to consolidate security and address humanitarian needs. I hope that these efforts will help to prevent further violence, in particular in northern Lebanon and throughout the country. I urge all Lebanese leaders to promote reconciliation.

44. I welcome the launching of the National Dialogue under the auspices of the President of the Republic and under the sponsorship of the League of Arab States. I urge all Lebanese leaders to approach this process in a spirit of cooperation and to exert every effort towards a positive outcome.

Palestinian militias

45. Another serious threat to the stability and sovereignty of Lebanon is posed by non-Lebanese armed groups. Over the past six months, there has been no progress towards the disarming of Palestinian militias, in accordance with the agreement

reached in the Lebanese National Dialogue of 2006 that Palestinian militias outside the camps would be disarmed.

46. In its policy statement, while rejecting the permanent resettlement of Palestinians in Lebanon, the Government of Lebanon acknowledged their right to a dignified life and pledged to continue its efforts to resolve their humanitarian and social concerns inside and outside the camps. The policy statement emphasized the need for the Palestinians to respect the sovereignty of the State and its laws. The Government also expressed its intention to work with the Palestinians to implement the decisions of the National Dialogue of 2006, while assuming the responsibility to protect the camps from any attack.

47. During an historic visit to Lebanon on 28 and 29 August, the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, reiterated his support to the above-mentioned decisions of the National Dialogue of 2006 and to the need for the Palestinians in Lebanon to respect the sovereignty and political independence of Lebanon. He commended the efforts by the Government of Lebanon to improve the living conditions of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.

48. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command and Fatah al-Intifada maintain significant paramilitary infrastructures in and outside refugee camps, and along the border between Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic. As the two Palestinian militias are headquartered in Damascus and in line with relevant Security Council resolutions, I urge the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic, as a Member State, to ensure that these groups abide by the decisions of the Government of Lebanon and Lebanese law.

49. Continuing security incidents in Ain al-Hilweh camp and the precarious situation of Al-Beddawi camp indicate that the restoration of law and order in the refugee camps will be a key to ensuring stability and security in Lebanon. The refugee camps provide safe haven for those who seek to escape the State's authority, such as militants, extremists, criminals and arms smugglers, in addition to Palestinian armed factions across all party lines. While security coordination and cooperation between the Lebanese security agencies and the Palestinian factions have improved, and attempts by the Palestine Liberation Organization to regain control of security in some camps have yielded some positive results, apart from the destroyed Nahr al-Bared camp, Lebanese authorities still do not maintain a permanent presence inside the camps. These facts constitute a reminder of the grave threat that armed groups pose to the stability and sovereignty of Lebanon, underlining the urgency of disarming them.

50. Given the detrimental effects of living conditions in the camps on the wider security situation in Lebanon, I remain convinced that it is imperative that progress be made not only towards disbanding and disarming Palestinian militias in Lebanon, but also towards improving the conditions in which the refugee population lives, without prejudice to the settlement of the Palestinian refugee question in the context of an eventual Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement.

51. I welcome the commitment by the Prime Minister, Fouad Siniora, and the Government of Lebanon, negotiated with the relevant Palestinian authorities and announced at the international donor conference held in Vienna on 23 June for the reconstruction of the Nahr al-Bared camp, to take joint responsibility for security inside the reconstructed camp. It is my hope that this arrangement will serve as a

model for Lebanon's other Palestinian refugee camps. I also wish to commend the Government of Lebanon for its continued support to the comprehensive programme for the improvement of living conditions in the camp areas, run by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), and encourage donors to provide the Agency with the resources required for this purpose.

52. While many Member States have responded generously to the appeals for funds for the reconstruction of Nahr al-Bared, and the rehabilitation of surrounding Lebanese villages, issued by the Government of Lebanon and UNRWA, the amounts raised to date have been insufficient to permit this important project to proceed. UNRWA also faces an acute shortfall in the funds required to sustain the displaced population of some 27,000 persons in the period ahead. Bearing in mind the potential political and security implications of any failure to sustain those displaced and make rapid and visible progress in reconstructing the original camp, I urge all those in a position to assist the United Nations efforts to respond to the Nahr al-Bared crisis to do so expeditiously.

General

53. In conclusion, the clashes in May and violent incidents since then have raised my concern that groups on all sides of the political spectrum may be rearming in contravention of both the Taif Agreement and resolution 1559 (2004). I call on Lebanese parties to halt immediately all efforts to acquire and build paramilitary capacities. In the meantime, I am mindful of the regional dimensions of this issue. Any foreign interference is in violation of Security Council resolutions.

54. I reiterate my firm conviction that the disarmament of Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias should be carried out through a political process that will lead to the monopoly on the use of force by the Government of Lebanon throughout all of its territory. The ultimate purpose of disarmament is the establishment of a strong Lebanese State for all inhabitants of Lebanon, as the Taif Agreement stipulated. Such a political process presupposes, in the first instance, clear respect of the Constitution from all parties, as well as dialogue and a spirit of cooperation and conciliation between the various political forces in Lebanon.

D. Presidential election process

55. The most significant progress made in the implementation of the resolution during the reporting period has been the compliance with its requirement for a free and fair presidential election according to Lebanese constitutional rules, as called for repeatedly by the Security Council since 2004. Thanks to the tireless efforts of the Emir of Qatar, his Prime Minister and the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, after 18 attempts and postponements, the Lebanese Parliament convened on 25 May to elect a new President of the Republic as part of the comprehensive agreement reached in Doha. Some 200 Arab and foreign dignitaries attended the session. I was represented by my Special Envoy. General Michel Sleiman received 118 votes out of 127. He is the first president to take office in Lebanon since the withdrawal of the Syrian troops in 2005.

56. I am pleased to report to the Security Council that the election of the President has revived the constitutional political process in Lebanon, in particular the convening of Parliament, which was paralysed since November 2006.

57. On 11 July, after seven weeks of intense negotiations, President Sleiman issued a decree forming a national unity government, headed by Fouad Siniora as Prime Minister. In accordance with the Doha agreement, the 30-member Cabinet included 16 seats allocated to the Parliamentary majority, 11 seats for the Opposition and the remaining 3 for the President. In accordance with prior practice, the new Cabinet also reflects the confessional structure of the country. On 12 August, Parliament expressed confidence in the new Cabinet and its policy statement by an overwhelming majority.

58. On 30 September, the Lebanese Parliament adopted a new electoral law based on the agreement reached in Doha in May. The new law paves the way for the holding of parliamentary elections early in 2009. It also constitutes the final step in the implementation of the three operational points of the Doha agreement — election of a President of the Republic; formation of a national unity government; adoption of an electoral law.

III. Observations

59. Since my last report to the Security Council, Lebanon was taken to the brink of civil war and back.

60. The violence that erupted in Lebanon in May represented one of the greatest threats to the very foundations of the Lebanese State in recent years, and a painful reminder to all Lebanese of the threats posed by the existence of armed groups outside the control of the State. This continues to render valid the remaining provisions of resolution 1559 (2004) as they relate to the disarmament of all armed groups and the extension of the Government's control throughout the country.

61. Nevertheless, I am pleased to report that the election of President Sleiman on 25 May 2008 represented a significant step forward in the implementation of resolution 1559 (2004). The election signalled the reactivation of Lebanon's constitutional process, to which all parties in Lebanon have since recommitted themselves.

62. In doing so, the Lebanese have taken a step further towards strengthening the sovereignty, stability, unity and political independence of their country. It is important that the parties continue on this path by implementing in full the provisions of the Doha agreement, including their commitment, inter alia, to refrain from the use of weapons to settle internal political disputes.

63. I am encouraged by the efforts of President Sleiman in this regard, and welcome the first session of the National Dialogue, held on 16 September to address the question of a national defence strategy and the status of the armed groups. This also represents a notable step towards the implementation of the resolution.

64. It remains, however, that this process is in its earliest stages and the parties have far to go. I am aware of the sensitivity and complexity of the issues involved and the challenges that may arise as a result. If Lebanon is to accomplish the process it has started of consolidating its sovereignty and national unity, all

Lebanese parties must fully engage in this national process in a spirit of genuine cooperation and commit themselves to achieving meaningful progress. I look forward to the next session, scheduled for 5 November.

65. I remain concerned by the political assassinations and explosions that continue to plague Lebanon. I strongly condemn these acts of terror aimed at Lebanon's sovereignty, political stability and unity. I am in particular disturbed by what appears to be an emerging pattern of attacks against the Lebanese Armed Forces, a prominent symbol of the authority of the State. I call on the Lebanese authorities to bring to justice all those who have perpetrated such crimes. These occurrences highlight the proliferation of weapons and armed groups that continue to operate in Lebanon, and whose existence is an ongoing violation of resolutions 1559 (2004) and 1701 (2006) and a direct threat to the stability of Lebanon and the region.

66. The issue of Hizbullah's weapons continues to be central to the political debate in Lebanon and to the Security Council resolutions on Lebanon. Hizbullah's maintenance of separate military assets and infrastructure is a fundamental challenge to the Government's attempts to consolidate the sovereignty and authority of the Lebanese State and obstructs constructive dialogue on political and security issues.

67. I reiterate my conviction that the disarming and disbanding of Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias should be accomplished through an inclusive political dialogue that addresses the political interests of all Lebanese, but ultimately confirms the sole political and military authority of the Government of Lebanon. Recently, in convening the first session of the National Dialogue, the Lebanese seem to have taken what I hope will prove to be an important first step in this direction. I urge the Lebanese parties to maintain and develop this momentum. Ultimately, this process will require the support of Lebanon's neighbours.

68. I am encouraged by positive developments in relations between Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic and the initiation of a process of normalization between the two historically close neighbours in mutual respect and in accordance with resolution 1680 (2006). I welcome the outcome of the Syrian-Lebanese summit held in Damascus in August 2008, in which they announced important steps their countries would take to this end. These developments seem to signal that a new page has been opened in the relations between the two countries, three years after the withdrawal of the Syrian forces.

69. I look forward to the opening of embassies in Beirut and Damascus by the end of the year. I applaud the historical steps that have been taken so far by President Sleiman and President Al-Assad towards this goal. For the first time since their independence, the two neighbouring States are establishing diplomatic relations. It is also important that the two States take concrete steps towards implementing all other points of agreement reached in Damascus, namely the activation of the joint committee to delineate their common border; joint activity to improve security arrangements along that border; accelerating the work of the joint committee on missing people in the two countries; reviewing bilateral relations objectively in ways that meet the interests of both countries; and trade and economic cooperation. I reiterate my conviction that all such measures are of mutual benefit to both countries and will help to ensure stability and progress in their bilateral relationship, thus promoting stability in the region. I stand ready to support Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic towards these goals.

70. I would like to praise the efforts of the Ministerial Committee of the League of Arab States presided by the Prime Minister of Qatar and the Secretary-General of the League, as well as its members, the Foreign Ministers of Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen, in promoting reconciliation among the Lebanese after the bloody clashes of May 2008. I wish in particular to commend His Highness Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani for hosting, facilitating and brokering the Doha agreement that led to the revival of the Lebanese constitutional institutions.

71. The Doha agreement represents the political framework in which the Lebanese leaders decided to cooperate in seeking political stability and security. I remain concerned, however, that the combination of mistrust among the parties, political competition in the context of the parliamentary elections, and the continued presence of militias obstruct the full implementation of the Doha agreement and may lead to tensions and possible further insecurity and instability in Lebanon and beyond. It is imperative that Lebanon preserve its comprehensive political framework of coexistence — as set out in the Taif Agreement — in an atmosphere free from intimidation.

72. I call on all parties and actors to fully abide by resolutions 1559 (2004), 1680 (2006) and 1701 (2006). I will continue my efforts for the purpose of the full implementation of these and all other relevant Security Council resolutions concerning the restoration of the territorial integrity, full sovereignty and political independence of Lebanon.